

HYGIENE APPARATUS AND VEHICLE INCORPORATING THE SAME

This invention relates to a hygiene apparatus suitable for use within a vehicle to enclose a portion of the space within the vehicle and minimise the movement of contaminants from the said enclosed space to the remainder of the space within the vehicle. The invention also relates to a vehicle incorporating such hygiene apparatus.

Modern vehicles, particularly cars, have many features which facilitate their use, for example satellite navigation, cruise control, radar parking.

However, cars lack sanitation facilities, such as a toilet, which many families, for example families with young children or elderly members, may require.

The problem with the provision of sanitation facilities within a vehicle is that there is a risk of contamination, particularly by air borne contaminants, of the space within the vehicle. The risk of contamination is particularly important if the space within the vehicle is also used, for example, to prepare food.

In the case of a car, for example, it is not feasible to provide a permanent separate enclosure to contain the sanitation facilities due to the space within the car the permanent enclosure would occupy.

There is a need, therefore, for a hygiene apparatus which can be temporarily deployed for use within a vehicle and which separates a potentially unclean area for use with sanitation facilities from the remainder of the space within the vehicle which is required to be maintained as clean.

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It is therefore an object of the present invention to provide a hygiene apparatus and a vehicle incorporating such a hygiene apparatus which overcomes or minimises these problems.

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According to one aspect of the present invention there is provided a hygiene apparatus adapted for use within the space within a vehicle comprising a collapsible flexible membrane substantially impermeable to air, the flexible membrane being adapted in use to enclose a portion of the space within the vehicle and to separate the said portion of space enclosed by the flexible membrane from a portion of the space within the vehicle provided outside the flexible membrane, wherein means is provided to maintain an air pressure difference between the portion of the space enclosed by the flexible membrane and the portion of the space within the vehicle but outside the flexible membrane.

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According to another aspect of the present invention there is provided a vehicle provided with a hygiene apparatus as hereinbefore defined.

The flexible membrane may be of bag-form.

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The air pressure within the portion of the space enclosed by the flexible membrane may be maintained above atmospheric pressure. Alternatively, the air pressure within the portion of the space enclosed by the flexible membrane may be maintained below atmospheric pressure.

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The means to maintain an air pressure difference may be an air pumping device.

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The air pumping device may be adapted to pump air from a region exterior of the vehicle into the portion of the

space enclosed by the flexible membrane. Alternatively, the air pumping device may be adapted to pump air from the portion of the space within the vehicle but outside the flexible membrane into the portion of the space enclosed by the flexible membrane.

Additionally or alternatively, the air pumping device may be adapted to pump air from the portion of the space enclosed by the flexible membrane to a region exterior of the vehicle.

The flexible membrane may be provided with attachment means for securing, either directly or indirectly, to an inner surface of the vehicle. The attachment means may be selected from straps, hook and loop material, hook and eye fasteners, magnets and combinations thereof.

The flexible membrane may be provided with supporting members. The supporting members may be in the form of inflatable tubular members and/or may be in the form of collapsible supporting rods.

The flexible membrane may be opaque or may be translucent.

Where necessary, lighting means may be provided in the form of at least one panel selected from translucent and transparent material provided in the flexible membrane.

Additionally or alternatively, lighting means may be provided in the form of a light source, for example a battery-powered lamp, provided within the space enclosed by the flexible membrane.

The flexible membrane may comprise a plastics material of sheet or fibre form and/or natural fibres.

The flexible membrane may be provided with a resealable opening suitable for a user to enter and exit the space enclosed by the flexible membrane.

- 5 The apparatus may include a storage unit adapted to be located within the vehicle for containing the flexible membrane when the flexible membrane is not in use.

- 10 Sanitation apparatus, for example a toilet, may be provided in the space enclosed by the flexible membrane.

- 15 Means may be provided to prevent the transmission of undesirable noise from the space enclosed by the flexible membrane to a region outside the flexible membrane, for example an acoustically impermeable material forming the flexible membrane. Alternatively, a noise generator may be provided within the space enclosed by the flexible membrane to mask the undesirable noise.

- 20 Means may be provided to prevent the transmission of undesirable odours from the space enclosed by the flexible membrane to a region outside the flexible membrane. The means may comprise an odour absorber, for example a chemical scrubber. Alternatively, a desirable odour generator may be provided within the space enclosed by the flexible membrane to mask the undesirable odour.
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- 30 Means may be provided to enable a user to rupture the flexible membrane in the event of an emergency to permit the user to exit the space enclosed by the flexible membrane. The means to rupture the flexible membrane may comprise an openable seam or a detachable panel provided in the flexible membrane.

For a better understanding of the present invention and to show more clearly how it may be carried into effect reference will now be made, by way of example, to the accompanying drawings in which:

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Figure 1 is a cut-away end view of an embodiment of a hygiene apparatus according to the present invention arranged in a first configuration within a vehicle;

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Figure 2 is a cut-away side view of the vehicle incorporating the hygiene apparatus shown in Figure 1;

Figure 3 is a cut-away top view of the vehicle incorporating the hygiene apparatus shown in Figure 1;

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Figure 4 is a perspective view of an embodiment of a supporting member incorporated in a hygiene apparatus according to the present invention;

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Figure 5 is a cut-away end view of the embodiment of the hygiene apparatus shown in Figure 1 arranged in a second configuration within the vehicle; and

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Figure 6 is a cut-away end view of the embodiment of the hygiene apparatus shown in Figure 1 arranged in a third configuration within the vehicle.

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Figures 1, 2 and 3 show a hygiene apparatus 1 according to the present invention in a deployed configuration within the space within a vehicle 2. The apparatus 1 comprises a flexible membrane 3, for example comprising a plastics sheet or fibre material and/or natural fibres. The flexible membrane is substantially impermeable to air and bacterial penetration. The material of the flexible membrane has a density of 150 grams per metre squared.

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The flexible membrane is of bag-form, the internal space within which can be varied depending on whether the flexible membrane is in the deployed configuration for use or a compacted configuration for storage. The flexible membrane is supported, when in the deployed configuration, by means of straps 5 attached directly to an inner surface of the vehicle. The flexible membrane forms a substantially sealed enclosure separating the space enclosed by the flexible membrane from the space inside the vehicle but outside the flexible membrane.

In the deployed configuration, the membrane encloses in the illustrated embodiment a substantially cuboid portion of the space within the vehicle of sufficient dimensions to enable a user to enter the space enclosed by the flexible membrane.

The shape of the deployed membrane is such that the majority of its external surface is in direct contact with, or in close proximity to, the internal surfaces of the vehicle and/or its fixtures. This allows the internal volume of the deployed membrane to be maximised and the tension in the membrane to be reduced, thereby relieving the forces in the attachment device between the vehicle and the membrane.

A resealable opening 7 provided in the flexible membrane 3 enables the user to enter and exit the space enclosed by the flexible membrane. The resealable opening is sufficiently large so as not to inhibit the user exiting the apparatus in an emergency, for example a fire.

The flexible membrane is opaque to provide privacy for the user within the space enclosed by the flexible membrane. At least one panel 9, for example of a translucent or

transparent material, is provided such that sufficient light can enter the space enclosed by the flexible membrane from the region surrounding the flexible membrane to enable the user to be able to see whilst within the space enclosed by the flexible membrane. Alternatively or additionally, a lamp, for example powered by a battery, may be provided. As an alternative, the flexible membrane may be translucent.

A pump 11, attached by suitable tubing to the flexible membrane, is provided within the vehicle. The pump moves air from the exterior of the vehicle into the space enclosed by the flexible membrane. The impedance to air flowing into the space enclosed by the flexible member is relatively low.

Attached to regions of an internal surface of the flexible membrane are supporting members 13 which provide regions of rigidity to support the flexible membrane when in the deployed configuration.

As shown in Figure 4 the supporting members are in the form of inflatable tubular channels 15 which can be inflated by the air pump 11 to a pressure in excess of the pressure within the flexible membrane. Apertures or pores 17 provided in the tubular channels 15 allow a controlled flow of air to exit the supporting members into the space enclosed by the flexible membrane.

Air within the space enclosed by the membrane can be vented to a region outside the vehicle by a resealable vent 19. The impedance of the resealable vent to air flowing out of the space within the membrane is higher than that of the tubing providing air into the membrane.

A storage unit 21 is provided within the vehicle into which the flexible membrane can be stored when in the compacted configuration.

5 A part, such as the base, of the flexible membrane may be sealed to the storage unit, typically the inside thereof, to ensure that the space enclosed by the flexible membrane is separated from the space within the vehicle but outside the flexible membrane.

10 Provided within the space contained by the flexible membrane is a toilet, for example a chemical toilet (not shown) which is secured to a suitable fixture of the vehicle within the storage unit. Other sanitation
15 facilities (not shown), for example apparatus for changing an infant's nappy, may also be provided within the space contained by the flexible membrane.

20 The toilet and other sanitation facilities are retained within the space enclosed by the flexible membrane and stored in the storage unit 21.

25 An aperture is provided in the region of the flexible membrane adjacent to the toilet to enable the toilet to extend into the space within the flexible membrane but still be connected to the vehicle. The edges of the aperture are arranged around the body of the toilet and are attached to the inner surface of the storage unit by
30 suitable fasteners, for example zip fasteners or press-studs. Sealing means is provided in the region of the fasteners to substantially prevent any escape of air from the space within the flexible membrane into the space within the vehicle but outside the membrane.

The fasteners are such that, if required, the flexible membrane can be detached from around the toilet and removed from the storage unit to be cleaned or disinfected, or to facilitate emptying of the toilet.

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Figure 5 shows the flexible membrane in a partially compacted configuration prior to either being stored in the storage unit 21 or being deployed within the space within the vehicle.

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Figure 6 shows the storage unit 21 provided within the vehicle, the flexible membrane in a compacted configuration being contained therein.

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In use, the storage unit 21 is opened and the pump 11 is activated to pump air, via an aperture (not shown) in the base of the flexible membrane, from the exterior of the vehicle into the supporting members of the flexible membrane.

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The tubular channels 15 of the supporting members 13 are inflated to an initial pressure in excess of the pressure of the space within the flexible membrane. Therefore, air from within the supporting members escapes at a controlled rate, via the apertures or pores 17, into the space within the flexible membrane. The escape of air via the apertures or pores causes the air pressure of the space within the flexible membrane to increase to a value higher than atmospheric. As such, the flexible membrane is inflated to fill a portion of the space within the vehicle.

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The inflated flexible membrane forms a substantially sealed enclosure which separates the space within the interior of the vehicle enclosed by the flexible membrane from the

remainder of the space within the interior of the vehicle outside the flexible membrane.

5 If required, air can be vented from within the flexible membrane to the outside of the vehicle via the resealable vent 19.

10 The pressure of the air within the supporting members and the space enclosed by the flexible membrane provides structural support to the flexible membrane when in the deployed configuration.

15 The inflated flexible membrane is secured by straps to the inner surface of the vehicle to maintain the flexible membrane in the deployed configuration in the event that the pressure within the flexible membrane is released, for example by the action of a user entering the space within the flexible membrane through the resealable opening.

20 Alternatively other securing means, for example hook and loop material (such as that sold under the Registered Trade Mark VELCRO), hook and eye fasteners or magnets can be used to maintain the flexible membrane in a deployed configuration.

25 The shape of the flexible membrane, when deployed, is such that complementary portions of the securing means on the outer surface of the flexible membrane and on the inner surface of the vehicle are substantially aligned to
30 facilitate attachment between the complementary portions. Further, where provided, a transparent or translucent panel may be aligned with an interior light of the vehicle.

35 If the resealable opening is opened and then resealed the pressure of the air within the flexible membrane will

rapidly decrease to atmospheric pressure. However, the pressure within the supporting members will not decrease as rapidly due to the controlled rate of air escape via the apertures and pores. As such, in addition to the straps, the inflated tubular channels of the supporting members provide rigidity to the flexible membrane and maintain the deployed configuration of the flexible membrane during a period in which the air pressure of the space within the flexible membrane is returned to a value higher than atmospheric.

The user enters the space enclosed by the flexible membrane through the opening from the exterior of the vehicle via a door of the vehicle. Once within the space contained by the flexible membrane the user reseals the opening and thus is provided with a private space within the interior of the vehicle in which the user can use the toilet and/or other sanitation facilities. The opening is held in a closed configuration by a suitable releasable fastener means, for example a zip or hook and eye fasteners.

As the flexible membrane encloses a substantially sealed space, any contaminants or odours produced by the use of the toilet are prevented from being transmitted to the space inside the vehicle that is outside the flexible membrane. The significant paths available by which contaminants can exit the space enclosed by the flexible membrane are via the pump, via the resealable vent, or through the resealable opening. All of these exit paths lead to the exterior of the vehicle.

When there is no longer a requirement for a separate space for use of the sanitation facilities, the straps supporting the flexible membrane are released and the air within flexible membrane is expelled to the exterior of the

vehicle by opening the resealable opening. Alternatively the pump can be activated to pump air from within the flexible membrane to the exterior of the vehicle. Therefore, the flexible membrane assumes the compacted configuration for storage, as shown in Figures 5 and 6. The flexible membrane, containing any residual contaminants enclosed by the flexible membrane can then be placed into the storage unit until required again.

As the potentially unclean space enclosed by the flexible membrane at no time can come into contact with the clean space within the vehicle outside the flexible membrane, the flexible membrane separates and maintains a barrier between the clean and unclean spaces.

A hygiene apparatus in accordance with the present invention has been described hereinbefore as using a pump to supply air to tubular channels of supporting members which, in turn, controllably release air into the space enclosed by the flexible membrane. However, it should be appreciated that, for example in the absence of the supporting members, the pump could supply air directly into the space enclosed by the flexible membrane.

A hygiene apparatus in accordance with the present invention has been described hereinbefore as using a pump to move air from the exterior of the vehicle into the space enclosed by the flexible membrane. However, it should be appreciated that the pump could move air from the portion of the space within the vehicle but outside the flexible membrane into the space enclosed by the flexible membrane.

Although a hygiene apparatus in accordance with the present invention has been described hereinbefore as having the air pressure within the space enclosed by the flexible membrane

at a value higher than atmospheric, it should be appreciated that the space enclosed by the flexible membrane could be maintained at a pressure lower than the pressure of the space within the vehicle but outside the flexible membrane.

The flexible membrane of a hygiene apparatus in accordance with the present invention has been described as being inflated by means of an air pump to deploy the flexible membrane for use. However, it should be appreciated that the flexible membrane can be simply unfolded from the storage unit and held either directly or indirectly, in a deployed configuration by means of supporting structures, such as straps, attached to the inside of the vehicle.

Collapsible supporting members attached to the flexible membrane could additionally or alternatively be used to provide rigidity to the flexible membrane in a hygiene apparatus in accordance with the present invention.

Such collapsible supporting members could comprise a number of relatively short lengths of rods which can be interconnected to form rigid members of sufficient length to support the flexible membrane. The interconnected lengths of rods could be disconnected from each other when the flexible membrane is not required and could, for example, be stored in the storage unit 21 along with the compacted flexible membrane.

As an alternative to, or in addition to, the securing means described hereinbefore, an air pump could be used to create a low pressure region between the top surface of the flexible membrane and the ceiling of the vehicle thus retaining the flexible membrane in a deployed configuration

in close proximity to the upper inner surface of the vehicle.

5 Although the air pump is shown in the figures as being provided adjacent to the storage unit it should be appreciated that the air pump could be provided within the storage unit.

10 Although a hygiene apparatus in accordance with the present invention has been described as comprising a flexible membrane in the form of a single bag-form enclosure, it should be appreciated that the flexible membrane could comprise a number of parts which, when combined, form a flexible sealed enclosure capable of separating the space
15 enclosed by the flexible membrane from the space within a vehicle but outside the membrane.

A hygiene apparatus in accordance with the present invention could also be provided with means to prevent the
20 transmission of undesirable noise from the space enclosed by the flexible membrane, for example by utilising acoustically impervious materials as known to a person skilled in the art. Alternatively a source of additional noise, for example provided within the space enclosed by
25 the membrane, could be used to mask undesirable noises from within the flexible membrane.

A chemical scrubber may be provided within the flexible membrane of a hygiene apparatus in accordance with the
30 present invention to absorb undesirable odours. Alternatively a desirable odour generating source, for example provided in the space enclosed by the flexible membrane, may be used to mask the undesirable odours.

35 Although the flexible membrane has been described as having an aperture to fit around a toilet fixed within the storage unit, it should be appreciated that a flexible membrane could provided without the said

aperture and the toilet could be provided unattached to the vehicle or storage unit but within the space within the flexible membrane.

5 A panel (not shown) may be provided in the flexible membrane which can be detached relatively easily from the remainder of the flexible membrane to rupture the flexible membrane in the event of an emergency. The panel would be of sufficient size to enable a user to rapidly
10 exit the space enclosed by the flexible membrane in response to the emergency.

Alternatively, a seam (not shown) may be provided in the flexible membrane which can be ruptured relatively easily
15 and opened to provide a sufficiently large aperture in the flexible membrane to enable a user to exit the space enclosed by the flexible membrane in response to an emergency.

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